DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 444 977 SP 039 434

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TITLE	Towards a Caring Community: Modeling, Dialogue, Practice, and Confirmation.
PUB DATE	2000-00-00
NOTE	22p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS	Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; Inquiry; Preservice Teacher Education; Reflective Teaching; Self Evaluation (Individuals); Student Empowerment; *Teacher Collaboration; Teacher Educators; *Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS	*Learning Communities; Teacher Knowledge

ABSTRACT

A teacher educator, engaged in ongoing practitioner inquiry to explore self as well as program, examines her evolution as a teacher of teachers through reflection, systematic inquiry, and collaboration. Relating autobiographically, she conjures up her professional stories and listens to her voice in an effort to define and refine her role, reflect upon and adjust her practice, construct her own professional knowledge, and enact her commitment to education feminism and transformative pedagogy. Her perspective or vision is consistent with what Noddings (1994) describes as an ethic of caring or relational ethics, and her practice is grounded in the power of community and relational knowing. Through modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation, she seeks to create and maintain a caring and empowering community of and for teachers, and to make education the practice of freedom. The result has been self-actualization and empowerment for her students and herself. (Author)

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ED 444 977

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Towards a Caring Community:

Modeling, Dialogue, Practice, and Confirmation

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SP039434

Abstract

A teacher educator, engaged in ongoing practitioner inquiry to explore self as well as program, examines her evolution as a teacher of teachers through reflection, systematic inquiry, and collaboration. Relating autobiographically, she conjures up her professional stories and listens to her voice, in an effort to define and refine her role, reflect upon and adjust her practice, construct her own professional knowledge, and enact her commitment to education feminism and transformational pedagogy. Her perspective or vision is consistent with what Noddings (1994) describes as an ethic of caring or relational ethics, and her practice is grounded in the power of community and relational knowing. Through modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation, she seeks to create and maintain a caring and empowering community of and for teachers, and to make education the practice of freedom. The result has been self-actualization and empowerment for her students and herself.

Towards a Caring Community:

Modeling, Dialogue, Practice, and Confirmation

Teacher
Committed, passionate
Freeing, engaging, affirming
Thinking outside the box
Releasing agency and voice
Nurturing an empowered community
Enabling license to fly
Educating for critical consciousness
Practicing a liberatory pedagogy
Change agent

I came into teacher education five years ago as coordinator of the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program at an urban commuter site of a small university in the University System of Georgia. This is a full-time, field-based, cohort program that prepares candidates for initial certification in secondary teaching areas. I characterize the year my students spend together as a cohort as their journey as students of teaching. As the cohort leader, serving as instructor, advisor, mentor, and field supervisor, my objective is to create and maintain a caring learning community that exposes these preservice teachers to a broad and current professional and pedagogical knowledge base from which they can construct, define, and refine their own professional knowledge through reflection, systematic inquiry, and collaboration; and facilitates their development as "architects of change" for improved school practice. Now, as I work also with experienced teachers and administrators in advanced teacher education programs,

in virtual as well as face-to-face classrooms, my objective is the same--to create and maintain a caring and empowering learning community for teachers. At the same time, as a teacher of teachers, I seek to construct, define, and refine my own professional knowledge and, thereby, engage in ongoing practitioner inquiry to study my practice through reflection, systematic inquiry, and collaboration.

Theoretical Perspective

I have come to see my role as that of a professional mother, building a supportive network of brothers and sisters and facilitating a familial and caring community. I ground my practice in the power of community and relational knowing, and I view my pedagogy as feminist, transformational, and liberatory--an "engaged pedagogy" that promotes "movement against and beyond boundaries" and "makes education the practice of freedom" (hooks, 1994, p. 12).

Relational knowing. Education feminism literature acknowledges the value of relational knowing in the construction of relevant and meaningful professional knowledge (Hollingsworth, 1992; Hollingsworth, Dybdahl, & Minarik, 1993; Noddings, 1994; Stone, 1994). Relational knowing leads to knowledge construction through a communal process that is "social, interactive, and connective"; a "process of change" that "take[s] changes in belief and connect[s] them to teaching practice" (Stone, p. 226).

Noddings (1994) describes a "relational ethic" or "ethic of caring" that is "richly applicable to teaching," characterized by "maternal thinking," and "tightly

tied to experience." A caring community is developed through "modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation." Through modeling--treating students "with respect and consideration"--teachers "encourage responsible self-affirmation in their students." Through true, open dialogue, trust is developed and "the search for enlightenment, or responsible choice, or perspective, or means to problem solution is mutual and marked by appropriate signs of reciprocity." The caring community is further developed through practice that encourages students "to support each other," provides "opportunities for peer interaction," and values "the quality of that interaction" as much as "the academic outcomes." Through confirmation, the teacher enables the student's self-actualization. "Teacher and student become partners in fostering the student's growth" (pp.173-178).

Hollingsworth (1992) illustrated this communal process in her work as a feminist teacher educator with preservice and beginning teachers. Using collaborative conversation to study the process of learning to teach, Hollingsworth found that the relational process of developing relationships and establishing trust moved the beginning teachers to "the point of claiming their own considered experience as knowledge and acting upon it...a point of self-actualization in voice from a feminist perspective of care" (p. 401).

Liberatory pedagogy. Several feminist theorists (Hollingsworth, 1992; hooks, 1994; Ropers-Huilman, 1998; to name a few) have given me the language to express how I perceive my role as teacher educator--to empower teachers "to

effect personal, political, and social changes" in schools (Hollingsworth, p. 401). However, hooks' discussion of an "engaged pedagogy" and "making education the practice of freedom" has been particularly telling. It clearly articulates what I aspire to as a teacher of teachers--"progressive, holistic education," through which I am able "...not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of [my] students." Accordingly, I "must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes [my] own well-being if [I am] to teach in a manner that empowers students" (pp. 13-15). hooks posits:

> When education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess. Engaged pedagogy does not seek to simply empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks. (p. 21)

Liberatory pedagogy seeks to create a caring community that embodies "a climate of free expression" in which "everyone feels a responsibility to contribute," "there is shared commitment and a common good that binds" teacher and students, "experience, confession and testimony [are] relevant ways of knowing," and the goal of the learning process is to "transform consciousness" (hooks, 1994, pp. 39-44, 89). The power of the caring learning community is in the sharing of

knowledge, and the flow of knowledge is not only from teacher to student but from student to teacher and from student to student.

Pedagogical Structuring

How does this theoretical perspective manifest itself in my practice? How do I structure my pedagogy to make education the practice of freedom? I borrow the term "pedagogical structuring" from Stone (1994), who proposes, in her discussion of relational knowing, "a new educational construct" that "connects beliefs about how we know to teaching to know" (p. 226). In studying my practice as a teacher of teachers, I look at how I structure assignments, the classroom environment, and the evaluation process to nurture caring communities. I look at how my practice encompasses modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation. I look for consistency between what I do and what I say I do. I look for evidence to document the effectiveness of my pedagogical structuring for creating an empowering community and promoting self-actualization for my students and myself.

Valuing experiential knowledge. One way that I structure assignments is to value the knowledge students bring to the classroom. Each year, the students in the MAT program begin with an assignment that requires that they write their critical educational autobiographies in order to study self--to examine and confront their thinking about teaching and learning. I begin the description of the assignment in my syllabus as follows:

> In order to facilitate the learning of others, it is essential that you begin with an understanding of your own learning. Learning is both a personal and social experience. We construct our own knowledge, but this is never in isolation as we are constantly influenced by the sociocultural situations in which we live. The critical educational autobiography serves as a reflective tool to help you consider your personal views about teaching and learning.

They share their stories and as a class we identify common themes. The students also identify and articulate their personal teaching metaphors using images that depict how they see themselves as teachers. This year I made a more direct connection between these two assignments by having them draw on their autobiographies to identify a metaphor or metaphors that capture the essence of themselves as teachers. Then they illustrated the metaphor by creating a quilt square and a poem. Each student presented his/her square and its story to the class. I, too, participated in this assignment. (My poem introduces this article.) I connected the squares to create a class quilt that served as a backdrop to refer back to throughout the year's journey.

Through this activity we were able to connect vision, voice, and language and look at the relationship between metaphor and teacher identity. Refusing to be prescriptive, I gave general parameters and encouraged the students to make the details their own. They are uncomfortable and resistant with this at first because

they have been used to teachers telling them exactly what they wanted and giving it to them. Yet each year I am delighted with the results because the students always exceed my expectations. Some are definitely more creative than others, but through presentation, they learn from each other. The value for them is more in the process than the product.

I see these kinds of activities as a means for developing methodologies for reflective practice and systematic inquiry. They also embrace the tenets of constructivism and culturally relevant pedagogy and acknowledge the power of story. At the end of each term, these preservice teachers reexamine these early products as part of portfolio presentations through which they engage in self assessment and, in a public forum, provide evidence of their growth as students of teaching. One student mentioned in her journal how, after experiencing the challenges of student teaching, her teaching metaphor had changed from that of teacher as gardener to an image of her "pushing an elephant up a flight of stairs." Another MAT student, during her portfolio presentation, indicated that although she maintained her original metaphor of teacher as "opening the door of knowledge," she now has added the metaphor of teacher as electrician. Students come to the classroom as "live wires," and it is her role to help them "make the connections."

Requiring peer interaction and collaboration. Recognizing the feeling of isolation that is often experienced by beginning teachers, I attempt to create an

environment that fosters collaboration. For example, students in the MAT program work as school teams to produce school ethnographies of their initial field placements, to study the culture of school. Throughout the year, they are required to participate in electronic discussions and listservs so that questions, concerns, and comments can be addressed through a communal process. Students respond to and support each other. Having participated in electronic cohort discussions initiated by me in the fall, students participated in a student-initiated discussion on student teaching experiences this spring. They are also encouraged to collaborate as research buddies for each other as they conduct classroom inquiry projects during their student teaching internships, to act as sounding boards for each other as they conceptualize their findings, and to read each other's writing for clarity. Here again, the process of collaboration and interaction and learning from each other is valued as much as the product.

The first listserv I initiated was for the 1998 MAT graduates, whom I invited to subscribe. About half (eleven) of these graduates subscribed, and of these, seven engaged in regular discussion about their trials and tribulations as first-year teachers. My role was primarily that of "listener" as they discussed the challenges of establishing effective classroom management procedures, motivating students, balancing teaching and administrative duties, balancing their school lives with their home lives, floating, dealing with angry parents and failing

students, and interacting with fellow teachers. I could tell from the conversation that they provided a crucial support network for each other.

> I hope you feel better. I can tell you are getting very frustrated and discouraged. I, too, have to step back and try to get my sanity. Then the questions I ask myself over and over are why am I here? Why did I want to be a teacher and what do I hope to accomplish as a teacher? I know it is hard, but you have to try to remember your purpose. Try not to let the administrative things cast a shadow over the real reason you are there. . . . I have had to just start telling myself that I can't sweat the small stuff or I will be crazy. . . . I have resigned myself to try to be the best teacher that I can be and if they want to fire me for forgetting to put my grades in a couple of times, or not turning in three tardies as an attendance penalty every time a student reaches that point, then they can go right ahead because obviously the whole vision of what education should be has been lost and it is not a place I would like to be.

Just knowing that they were each experiencing the same kinds of challenges provided comfort. Here was an opportunity to vent and be heard.

> I feel like I'm in a fight every day. When I get home each day, I've had it! I've got nothing left for my family. I've tried to be Ms. STRONG, but I can't do it anymore. . . . I thought this would be fulfilling, helping kids whom everyone else had given up on. It seems like now I not only have to

> struggle with the kids, but other teachers too. . . . As of this point, I'm ready to wait tables and say forget it. I feel sure I can say "more tea" and not get cussed out.

The power of the community extended beyond the timeframe of the program and served as a vehicle to facilitate induction into the profession.

> We thought and planned about this year for so long and now it is over. I can honestly say that I have loved this year. I have learned a lot, made some mistakes, but had an awesome experience.

Encouraging reflective practice and systematic inquiry. Oftentimes, students of teaching expect to be told the right answers--the how-to's. In my practice I stress that there is no one right way--what works for some does not work for all. I do not represent myself as expert but as a facilitator for their learnings. I tell them they will get out of this what they put into it. They are not expected to be receptacles of knowledge but producers of knowledge. I encourage the development of the tools of reflection and systematic inquiry. Beginning the first day of the journey, the students are expected to maintain a journal in which they record and reflect upon their experiences as students of teaching. They are expected to read and respond to their own journal entries, to look for patterns and themes. Periodically, I also read and respond to their entries. From journal entries questions for further investigation emerge. Students develop proposals for classroom inquiry projects that they carry out during their ten-week student

teaching internships. The primary objective is to study their practice systematically in order to improve teaching and learning in their classrooms, to begin a cyclical and reiterative process that leads to an action plan and improved practice. Students look at such topics as cooperative learning, teacher behaviors that promote motivation, techniques to improve reading skills, the use of alternative assessment techniques, and relieving test anxiety.

One student investigated the question, "In what ways does the introduction of both academic and personal individuality into the classroom affect academic achievement, student/teacher relationships, and classroom community?" Although her study "provided no concrete answers" to her research question, she resolved to continue to study her practice through reflection and systematic inquiry:

> After working in a high school for my internship, I can definitely say that preparing students for life beyond high school is an important goal for teachers. I think that as an educator, I need to be aware of my long-term goals such as this as well as my more obvious short-term curriculum goals. With this sort of awareness, I can examine my practice constantly and make sure my objectives move students toward the goals. This study has given me the opportunity to recognize a major goal and has also provided me a direction for my practice that will allow me to work toward achieving this goal.

Sharing evaluative power. What I must also recognize as I seek to empower students is the power I hold as their teacher. Much of that power resides in my role as evaluator--the one who "gives" grades. I encourage students to participate in the evaluation process through self-evaluation and peer-evaluation. They, for example, are asked to videotape themselves teaching, not for me to view, but for them to have an opportunity to step back and evaluate themselves--to see in ways they are not able to see while actively engaged in the process of teaching. They look for what works and what needs to be improved and develop their own action plans for improvement in teaching and learning in their classrooms. I respond to their written evaluations of the videotapes with questions and comments that emerge from my "listening in."

Similarly, culminating activities--portfolio presentations--require that they reflect upon their journeys and provide evidence of their emerging competencies, using the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) standards as a guide. They are encouraged to name their own learnings, to define their own professional knowledge. They prepare an oral presentation and exhibit that is shared with an audience of their peers. Through this communal process, they continue to learn from each other, and I learn from them what is working and what needs to be improved in my own practice.

Building a virtual caring community. This spring, I attempted to create a caring learning community through web-based instruction. I designed an online

course, Issues in Secondary Curriculum, that promoted peer interaction and collaboration through asynchronous (discussion forums and email) and synchronous activities (chat sessions). The students were in-service teachers from various disciplines with a maximum of four years of secondary teaching experience. Each module included assignments that required students to read assigned articles and post responses to a discussion forum; to work in groups using discussion forums, group email, and chat rooms; to prepare presentations on assigned or selected topics for scheduled chat sessions; and to participate in interactive discussions on a given topic during a scheduled chat session. They were encouraged to draw from readings and their professional experiences in formulating responses. Because the whole course is text based, everyone had to respond and every response was shared. I, as the instructor, was not the only one who had the opportunity to see the results of students' learnings. Completed assignments were shared with everyone. Chats were recorded and posted to the course site for class members to review.

Formal written assignments were sent as attachments to me via course email, but the student thinking was shared interactively through discussion forums, additional readings, and chat sessions. For example, students were asked to write their personal curriculum philosophies as an assignment in one module after having discussed and massaged their thoughts in forum postings; selected philosophy papers were then posted to the course site as additional readings to

respond to in a later module. In developing the focus of their individual curriculum projects, which was the culminating assignment, they, in earlier module assignments, "thought out loud" in the discussion forums about what they could do to impact teaching and learning in their classrooms, bouncing ideas off each other. As a result of expressions of interest in alternative assessment by several students, one student asked me to create a forum where they could share the information they found on this topic. A couple of students, as they brainstormed ideas for their curriculum projects, directed statements to me like "I'm not sure if this is what you want." My response to them was, "You are not doing this for me. You are doing this for you." I wanted them to develop doable curriculum improvement plans that addressed issues that they identified as important. Collaboration was encouraged. At the end of each module, I posted a reflective assessment. This let them know my teacher thinking about the success of the module activities and helped to clarify my expectations, which was useful as we proceeded into subsequent modules.

That a caring community was established was clearly apparent. The students were extremely supportive of each other and provided constructive feedback to each other. Resources discovered were shared. Students got to know each other personally as well as professionally, and displayed a warm respect for each other's contribution to the whole. For the final discussion, I asked for their comments about the course. One student commented, "I do think that a majority

of the learnings came from the chats and not the book." Another said, "We have worked together as a whole, and just like we have known each other for a long time." And another:

> I have really enjoyed this class, and I feel like I have had more of an opportunity to comfortably work through some very complex issues I have with education. . . . I have very much appreciated having the forum to solidify my views on several points and discover that I am completely unresolved on other points. I have liked having to produce so many of my own thoughts; I think that has been extremely useful to me as student and as a professional. And it has been a lot of fun getting acquainted with everyone on-line. I think that in a normal classroom environment, we would not have the same opportunities to share so much of our beliefs to so many of the rest of us. Your ideas have given me a lot of great input that I do not think I would've gotten elsewhere.

As the instructor, I designed and facilitated the instructional process, but I learned as much as, if not more than, the students.

Practitioner Inquiry

The processes I use to study my practice are the same as those I encourage my students to use--reflection, systematic inquiry, and collaboration. I maintain a journal, although I do not write in it as often as I should. But I do reflect continuously. I examine student work and students' responses to their work.

Electronic communications--email, listservs, discussion boards, chats--provide transcripts. I conduct individual and group interviews of MAT graduates. And I review the student opinion surveys of my classes.

In addition, I collaborate with my colleagues, thinking out loud, bouncing ideas back and forth, just as I ask of my students. "...it is crucial that critical thinkers who want to change our teaching practices talk to one another, collaborate in a discussion that crosses boundaries and creates a space for intervention" (hooks, p. 129). I interact regularly with a fellow teacher educator as we ride together to campus, an hour and a half each way once or twice a week. We share our professional stories and process our teacher thinking. Through this reflexive process, we interpret our professional experiences, create professional narratives, and construct our professional knowledge.

This year we initiated a collaborative research project with four pairs of our preservice teachers and their host teachers to investigate the use of multimedia assessment portfolios to document the preservice teachers' developing competencies and K-12 student learning as well as promote reflective practice among us all--teacher educators, host teachers, and preservice teachers. The collaborative assessment process, while facilitating the reflective practice of the preservice teacher, created an environment that propelled us more experienced practitioners to study our own practice to include our role as mentors of beginning

teachers. Together, we have presented our work at professional conferences and are currently co-authoring an article for journal submission.

Through modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation, I engage in an ongoing process of community building and networking. It is how I structure my pedagogical practice. The result has been self-actualization and empowerment for my students and for me. I can see it in their soaring spirits, in the caring communities they create, in their dynamic leadership in their school communities, in their creative problem solving, and in their expressions of appreciation. I see my role, not as giving of or sharing any power I may possess, but as releasing, or helping to release, the power that already resides within them. I am empowered by what I see.

Occasionally, however, there is resistance, particularly by my preservice teachers, to reflection, systematic inquiry, and collaboration, and to community-building. The evidence is in the not-so-positive responses to how I do what I do. One MAT student in her posting to the discussion forum created for progress reports on classroom inquiry projects respectfully wrote, "Research and reflection are important, but right now I feel like I want to focus on my students and what I am teaching them." For this student, and others with similar comments, I have failed to make the connection between reflection and systematic inquiry and the process of learning to teach. While the affirmation and confirmation and self-actualization feel good, it is such resistance, though painful, that keeps me

engaged in ongoing practitioner inquiry and striving to make education the practice of freedom.

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